

Pact made on water standards

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SACRAMENTO — Gov. Pete Wilson and top Clinton administration officials said today they had agreed on water quality standards for the San Francisco Bay and Sacramento-San Joaquin River Delta in a historic breakthrough in California's water wars.

Joining Wilson in making the announcement at the state Capitol were U.S. Interior Secretary Bruce Babbitt and U.S. Environmental Protection Agency Administrator Carol Browner.

"Peace has broken out amid the water wars," Wilson said, describing the pact as "a landmark agreement."

The three-year pact technically dedicates more water to the environment. But the resulting cuts may not be immediately felt by farms and cities, which have been affected by drought and temporary increased diversions for the environment.

The EPA must announce water quality standards by a court-set deadline today, but has agreed to withdraw the goals early next year in favor of state water quality standards.

The deal, completed during marathon talks in recent days, represents a major breakthrough in the longtime struggle over management of California's water. The path to today's

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Water pact

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announcement has been strewn with lawsuits and broken accords.

The state standards were a compromise forged among three primary competitors for water — farmers, city representatives and environmentalists. All three groups feared the uncertainty ahead if they failed to reach

agreement.

Their principal accomplishment was agreeing on the amount of water that would be dedicated to the environment. The accord also anticipates new endangered species listings so there will be fewer surprise diversions of water to the environment.

The immediate effect will be slight because deliveries to cities and farms have been reduced temporarily anyway to protect two endangered fish species in

the ecologically sensitive delta. Flows also have been cut by continuing drought conditions.

But the accord will continue the environmental protections, providing the first new comprehensive rules governing the delta since 1978.

Compared to the 1978 rules, cities and farms would give up a combined average of 450,000 acre-feet year, or nearly 10 percent of the supplies typically drawn each year from the delta.

An acre-foot serves a family of five for a year.

Cuts would double to more than 20 percent — up to 1.1 million acre-feet a year — in the event of a prolonged drought. Threatened species are most imperiled during a drought, but that is also when cities and farms can least spare the water.

On the long term, it's unclear who will lose the most water. Most likely, it will be farmers, who use more than 80 percent.